TALKS ON BIRDS

Reported by J. H. Paul, Director of Nature Study at the State Normal.

V.—Prof. Goodwin's Lecture on the Mourning Dove.

The work intended especially for the third grade comprises the group known as the seed-eating birds, and the emblem for this grade and group is the mourning dove. In arranging work for this grade, it seemed best to push the game birds farther forward—for more advanced pupils—and to make use of a group that would be accessible to the younger ones. The birds which go to make up this group have a further advantage, as suitable objects of study for this grade, in that many of them are residents. It is thus possible to observe them at different seasons; moreover, they are widely distributed in our state, and so furnish material for work in the various localities.

The grouping here used is not of the hard and fast order. Birds will be included that eat insects and fruit, as well as seeds. The term selected is appropriate, however, because only such birds will be included as find at least 50 per cent of their food among the seeds. It may be noted, in passing, that even when adult birds get one-half or three-fourths of their food from the seeds, they usually feed their nestlings on insects. Not all do this, but a great majority do.

The Bullock oriole is the western representative of the Baltimore oriole, taking the place of that species throughout the Pacific coast region. It does not differ essentially in its habits of nesting or in its food from its eastern relative; but it is less beautiful in plumage.

The black-headed grosbeak is found over the whole Pacific coast and Rocky mountain region, and takes the place filled by the rose-breasted grosbeak in the eastern part of the United States.

The Mourning Dove.

This bird is one of the widely distributed birds of our state, though it appears to be less common in some of the counties to the south, while it is very generally to be met with in the southwest, in Washington county, for example.

In Piute and Wayne counties these birds were not common in August, 1907, though I met with a few at Marysvale in the former, and near Koosharem and Loa in the last-named county.

The mourning dove is to be found in sagebrush reaches, far from human habitations—provided water be not too far away—along the highways, in twos and threes; in the meadows and grain fields; in pastures and foothills, as well as in canyons. One cannot travel far afield in our state, or drive along the highways, without hearing the sharp whistle of this bird's wings, as it springs from the ground or a limb of a tree, and with a few flaps to get under way, goes sweeping off to other feeding grounds.

Food of the Dove.

The food habits of this dove give it an important place among the forces which make possible good crops to the tiller of the soil. It eats practically no insects, 99 per cent of its food being seeds. And of these it eats immense quantities. Birds examined in the biological laboratories at Washington were found to contain all the way from 6,000 to 9,200 seeds. The statement seems almost incredible, but it is none the less a fact.

Mourning doves are fond of grain—of wheat, rye and oats—but so far as my observations have extended they take nothing but waste grain. That is, they do not break down stalks—as English sparrows do, for example—or feed on the sheaves, or shocks, or stacks of grain. They may be found in the fields of standing grain, and especially in the stubble, where they find much that has been shelled or cut and not gathered up. This they eat. They will sometimes come into the chicken yard and eat with the fowls; or they will search out corrals in the open fields, where hogs or other creatures are being fed, and help themselves to grain, unless driven away.

But it is among weeds and grasses for the most part that they find the enormous quantities of food required by them. Its appetite for seeds, especially of weeds, seems never to be satisfied. And, between its crop, which is capable of a most surprising expansion, and the stomach, no small number of seeds must be gathered. I found a flock of these birds hunting a patch of rattle weed from which every seed pod appeared to have been stripped as late as the beginning of October last year. They seemed unwilling to leave a feeding ground where they had been so bountifully provided for during two months, at the least.

Song of the Dove.

The notes of this bird are sweet and have an exquisite pathos. There is always in it a sadness and tenderness which is unmatched by any other bird. Though its mate may be within a few feet, I have the feeling, always, that the singer—if it may be so designated—is sighing its heart out for the loved one that is far, far away. The beginning of the song is of a character to give emphasis to this impression. The first note is always a sort of catching the breath: Ah, co-co-co-co-co-co-co. It seems to me that the birds are trying to express the sentiment which the great poet uttered when he wrote:

'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.

This characteristic of the song seems always to touch tender chords. Wilson, writing of it, says: "The hopeless woe of settled sorrow, swelling the heart of female innocence itself, could not assume tones more sad, more tender and affecting. Its notes are four; the first being somewhat the highest, and preparatory, seeming to be uttered with an inspiration of the breath, as if the afflicted creature were just recovering its voice from the convulsive sobs of distress; this is followed by three deep and mournful moanings, that no person of sensibility can listen to without sympathy. A pause of a few moments ensues, and again the solemn voice of sorrow is renewed as before." (American Orbithology, Vol. II, p. 290).

Someone has given us this bit, from the Russian, as explaining the deep-seated sadness that lies back of the song:

Stranger—Why mourning there so sad, thou gentle dove?

Dove—I mourn, unceasing mourn, my vanished love.

Stranger—What, has thy love then fled, or faithless proved?

Dove—Ah, no! the sportsman wounded him I loved!

Stranger—Unhappy one, beware! that sportsman's nigh!

Dove—Oh, let him come—or else of grief I die.

Their General Habits.

Of the general habits of these birds, there are many that might be considered, but reference can be made to only a few of them.

Even the most unobservant must have noticed these birds in pairs or in threes, along the highway, for one cannot walk far without being made aware of the presence of mourning doves. They have a way of springing up and taking wing in an unexpected and nervous manner; then, if they are not too seriously alarmed, they hesitate, on wing, as if uncertain about leaving. Their flight has a jerky, irregular movement; and if the bird decides to remain, it will alight near or describe a small circle and return to the spot from which it was startled. If, however, on wing it seems disposed to go elsewhere, the flight is quick, vigorous and always accompanied by a peculiar whistling of the wings at the outset. The doves seek the highways for the double purpose of dusting themselves and of procuring gravel to aid in grinding their food.

This bird, in common with doves generally, has the graceful movement of the head, forward and back, as it walks. Like others of the feathered tribe, these birds do not escape entirely the subtle touch of spring. The unseen power which turns the heart of most living things toward love, which sends the bobolink up his stairway of song, and causes the redwing to gurgle and struggle with the sentiments he would fain express, bringing him into some of the most ludicrous positions, in which he half lifts his wings and rocks his convulsed body—that power touches these gentle creatures, so well behaved, ordinarily, and causes them to make curious acrobatic flights above the tree tops, after which they return to the starting point.

Where Doves Are Found.

Though these birds are widely distributed, and many of them are to be found at a distance from settlements (we found them quite numerous over at Doremus, where the only suggestion of human habitation was the board placed near the railroad track with the single word, the name of the station, upon it) they can be relied upon to be not too far from water. A mourning dove in a sagebrush desert is as certain a harbinger of the presence of water, as is an oasis in Sahara. They drink often, and those who hunt them, especially Indians, frequently make use of this well known habit to secure them easily.

These birds are very much attached to each other, and the shooting of one often brings its mate back, within gunshot, to investigate the delay of its fellow. On such occasions the second bird will alight near, and give every evidence of anxious solicitude, peering about, moving its beautiful head in its characteristic fashion, and sometimes uttering its sad, sweet call.

Their Nesting Habits.

In the matter of a nesting site, the mourning dove appears remarkably indifferent. In some localities it seems to build upon the ground more often than elsewhere; again, one will rarely find a nest in such a situation, but must look to the horizontal limbs of trees, and suitable bushes, for this nest. The nest itself is an exceedingly slipshod affair; a few rather coarse straws and weed stalks put together so loosely that the eggs may be seen from below; and as there is really no pretense of a lining, the young birds would seem to be almost grilled upon the cob-work bottom of the nest. Someone, Mrs. Wright, I believe, calls the female dove a "spineless bundle of flesh and pretty feathers, gentle and refined in manners, but slack and incompetent in all she does."

Two pure white eggs are laid, and usually two broods are reared in a season. Sometimes an attempt at a third brood is made, but this, I am satisfied, is rare. Sometimes when a nest has been destroyed, or repeated mishaps have overtaken the doves, they nest quite late in the season. I found a male bird on a nest on the 10th day of August, 1907.

Inhumanity of Game Laws.

Here it might be well to direct attention to the inhumanity of that portion of our game laws which permits an open season for these birds to begin so early that in many instances one or both of the parent birds are killed before the young are able to care for themselves. That is inexcusable brutality, for there is time enough in which to hunt these gentle creatures, without destroying the adult birds and starving to death the helpless little ones. Utah ought to join the rapidly increasing list of states—twenty-one in number now—which permit no open season for this bird. It has been demonstrated beyond successful dispute that there are few birds so nearly free from objectionable habits, and so extremely valuable to all tillers of the soil. As already indicated, these birds destroy an almost incredible amount of weed seeds.

The work of incubation is shared by both parents. I have taken male birds on the nest.

The young also are cared for by both birds. They are fed for the most part on what is known as "pigeon's milk," a food that is regurgitated by the old birds. This comprises about 70 per cent of the food of the young, the remainder consisting of several kinds of seeds, such as sorrels, rag weed, pigeon grass, etc.

NEW BOOKS IN LIBRARY.

The following thirty volumes will be added to the public library Monday morning:

Miscellaneous.

Caird—Lay Sermons.
Dole—Spirit of Democracy.
Gauss—American Government (reference).
Wells—New Worlds for Old.

Biography.

Allingham—Diary.
Boigne—Memoirs, Vols. 2 and 3.
Claude—Memoirs.
Jackson—Bernard Shaw.
Laur—Heart of Gambetta.
Morgan—True Patrick Henry.
Parsons—Garrick and His Circle.
Tarbell—He Knew Lincoln.

Fiction.

Austin—Santa Lucia.
Beach—The Barrier.
Ewald—Old Room.
Howells—Fennel and Rue.
James—Daisy Miller, The American.
Richmond—With Juliet in England.

Children's Books.

Cody—Four American Poets.
Hamp—Boys of Crawford Basin.
Ide—Little Queen of Hearts.
Jeffries—Wood Magic.
Marden—Stories From Life.
Morris—Heroes of the Navy in America.
Reed—Brenda's Bargain.
Sanders—Forest Playfellow.
Villars—Enchanted Automobile.
Wiggin—Magic Casements.